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MAKING ESTIMATIVE JUDGMENTS: SOME LESSONS  
LEARNED FROM MISJUDGMENTS

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1. Nearly every one is familiar with the procedure by which National Intelligence Estimates are prepared. This procedure is important because it is designed to ensure that those responsible for policy decisions receive an agreed view (or a carefully delineated disagreement) based upon the best information and most thorough review possible. But these procedures only provide the framework within which people function, and the estimates are only as good as they are made by those who operate the machinery.

2. In this machinery the Board of National Estimates (BNE) plays the most important managerial and intellectual role. The BNE controls the draft; it is prepared by the O/NE Estimates Staff under the Board's direction, it is the Board's draft which is discussed with the USIB and CIA component representatives, and it is the Board member who has chaired these discussions who presents the estimate to the USIB. The staff member who prepares the initial draft also plays an important role; he is more familiar with the information than most Board members are, and if he is a skillful writer and convincing defender of his views, he puts a

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stamp on the draft which is ineradicable. The Board chairman -- particularly if he has had a long familiarity with the subject of the estimate and is temperamentally inclined toward playing a strong role -- will also put his strong stamp on an estimate.

3. Nevertheless, it is the Board in its corporate capacity which assumes the responsibility to the DCI for the form and substance of the estimates. The Board of National Estimates is his Board to formulate his views and to take account for him of the information and judgments which are applicable. While he personally may rely upon some Board members more than others, in his official capacity his concern is that the Board is sufficiently competent and balanced in composition and experience that he can be confident that all significant aspects of a problem have been considered. This is not to say that he does not question or modify the Board's formulations, for he does; but it is his arm and he must look upon it in a corporate sense, even though he knows that all members are not equally well versed on all subjects or participated equally on all estimates.

4. How the individual Board member performs and how he formulates his views are thus of very considerable importance to the Director and to the other intelligence chiefs who are called upon to affirm or dissent from the views which the Board puts

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forth to the Director and on his behalf. The writer, as a Board member (and former staff member) can only speak for himself. He does not and could not claim a specialist's competence on more than a few areas or subjects, though he has written or presided over estimates regarding every major area of the world. Nor does the writer claim any particular method or technique for arriving at judgments on particular questions. Each estimative situation is unique, and one must rely upon a variety of supports -- the amount and persuasiveness of the evidence; the methods of analysis used by the contributor; the judgment of those in whom special confidence is reposed -- whether because of their study, experience, or sharpness of mind; his own background in the subject and, for want of a better word, his own "hunches".

5. In the dictionary sense of the term, a "hunch" is a feeling or suspicion not based upon evidence but upon premonition. I do not believe in premonitions, but I will admit of the "hunch" if I can define it. It must of course be compounded of something: a sense of the logic of the situation, a ring of authenticity concerning certain evidence, a feeling of uneasiness because some factor in a situation is unexplained or prima facie unexplainable, a sense of the general weight of evidence though no individual piece of it is persuasive or conclusive, a belief that some leader

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or group -- because of emotional or ideological predilections -- is likely to act in a certain way despite the irrationality or illogic of such a course. These kinds of factors enter in most frequently when no solid factual base exists or when the evidence is contradictory. The most notable case of a correct "hunch" was in 1962 when Director John McCone kept worrying the possibility of the Soviets installing missile bases in Cuba despite the absence of reliable evidence to this effect and despite the BNE's belief that the Soviet leaders would not do anything so foolish.

6. In some ways the estimative job is easier than it was ten or fifteen years ago. We have, for example, much more and better evidence on many aspects of Soviet military capabilities than we did then; collection methods have improved and analytical skills developed. But there are still many problems which strain the estimator's capacity. Some which cause the most severe doubts are those relating to (a) likely courses of action in unstable areas or situations of tension, (b) the likely course of events in situations where the strengths of competing forces appear evenly balanced or are difficult to assess, and (c) where the evidence is contradictory, often because strong efforts are made to conceal or deceive. In each of these types of problems, the Board of National Estimates has made misjudgments, and in each I

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have participated in those misjudgments. I would like to describe as best I can recall my role in three estimates over which I presided and which -- if not explicitly, at least implicitly -- rendered an incorrect judgment.

A. Courses of action in unstable areas or situations of tension.

7. Estimates of this type are both the most challenging and the most discouraging to make. The natural reaction is that one is being asked to do the impossible; yet, this is often the most rewarding if done successfully (and although I here speak of a failure, it often is done successfully). It is, of course, impossible to predict the course of events, but one can describe how the parties involved apparently think about a situation, how they have acted toward it, and how they might act toward hypothetical changes. The case I would like to take up is that of an estimate entitled, "The Arab-Israeli Dispute: Current Phase," published 13 April 1967.

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8. This estimate was undertaken, as it is stated in the introduction, in the context of "an increase in the recurrent cycle of tensions" in the Palestine dispute and in the wake of the Israeli raid on Samu in Jordan in late 1966 which shook the monarchy in Amman. These raised the question of whether the modus vivendi which had prevailed between Israel and its Arab neighbors since 1957 was coming to an end. Most of what the estimate said was right:

a. "Rivalries and disputes among the Arabs reduce their chances of doing anything significant about their quarrel with Israel; these rivalries also create some danger of precipitating crises from which large-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities could develop."

b. "The Israelis seem likely to continue existing policies, including occasional retaliatory action; they would resort to force on a large scale only if they felt their security seriously endangered."

c. "The Israelis could best any one of their neighbors and probably all of them collectively. Arab cooperation being what it is, Israel probably would not be obliged to take them on all at once."

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d. "The Soviet leaders almost certainly view the Arab-Israeli dispute as promoting their interests. .... But the Soviets do not want an outbreak of large-scale conflict in the area, since this would carry serious risk of a US-Soviet confrontation and thus threaten the positions which the Soviets have already won in the area."

The estimate had one final conclusion which, though it was technically correct, conveyed a sense of reassurance which, in light of the events of May and June 1967 was not the full story:

"Although periods of increased tension in the Arab-Israeli dispute will occur from time to time, both sides appear to appreciate that large-scale military action involves considerable risk and no assurance of leading to a solution. In any event, the chances are good that the threat of great power intervention will prevent an attempt by either side to resolve the problem by military force."

9. I say that this last conclusion was essentially correct because the recent war was not an attempt to "resolve" the Arab-Israeli problem by military force. It fits under the rubric of the conclusion (see a above) that rivalries among the Arabs created the danger of "precipitating crises from which large-scale

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Arab-Israeli hostilities could develop." A review of the available information quite clearly indicates that the Soviets had a role in precipitating the crisis by passing intelligence information about Israeli plans for a punitive expedition against Syria to the Syrians and Egyptians (see d above, "The Soviet leaders almost certainly view the Arab-Israeli dispute as promoting their interests"). Nasser, who had been accused in the past by his Arab rivals of hiding behind the skirts of the UN, this time sought to avoid this charge. His mobilization and the events which followed then led the Israeli leaders to conclude that their security was "seriously endangered" (see b above). Quite clearly, both the Soviets and the Egyptians made some miscalculations about the consequences of their actions.

10. One can, as I have done, exculpate oneself by this kind of textual exegesis. But there was in the estimate a serious lacuna; we did not sufficiently treat the possibilities arising out of terrorist activities, border raids, troop movements, propaganda, political warfare, and the psychological effects of these in Israel and the Arab world. Had we understood these better, we should have ended the estimate by noting the dangers which these could have provoked rather than upon the unlikelihood of a deliberate resort to force.

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11. Why did we make this error? I think we were under two misapprehensions. The first was that we overestimated Soviet good sense, something we have done before (e.g., our judgment that the Soviets would have better sense than to deploy missiles to Cuba in 1962). It is, I think, a safe judgment that if the Soviets thought in mid-May what they knew on 5 June, they would have kept certain intelligence information to themselves.

What I have learned is that how the Soviets may think about a particular area and what they may do tactically may not be entirely consistent. We as estimators must recognize more frequently (as we often do in observing the tactical moves of governments regarding which we have more complete knowledge) that specific actions taken by the agents of a government do not always flow from the general policy objectives or posture of the leadership.

12. The other misapprehension, I believe, was a failure to comprehend the dynamic aspects of Near Eastern politics. We did not realize how much more confident in themselves both the Israelis and Egyptians had become. We did not therefore realize how much lower was the threshold of Nasser's readiness to expose himself to danger, and how much lower was the threshold of Israel's

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readiness to fight against creeping threats to its existence.

I cannot say whether this was a failure in intelligence reporting or in analysis; I suspect it was a bit of both. US personnel abroad are often too absorbed in the day-to-day business of their operations to detect a growing change of mood; analysts in Washington are too often cynically prone to think their clients are the same feckless (or scheming) fellows they always were and that nothing much changes. I, for one, am prepared to be a bit more cynical myself about area specialists.

B. Course of events where strengths of competing forces appear evenly balanced or are difficult to assess.

13. The estimate I would like to discuss in this connection is one which had a long and tortuous history. It was initiated in October 1962 and was finally cleared by the USIB in April 1963; it was entitled, "Prospects in South Vietnam." These were days when Diem was still president of South Vietnam and Madame Nhu still riding high. The US commitment was still in the form of advisors and logistical support. We were to try to assess how things were going, what the problems were, what the prospects were. I do not wish here to examine all the estimates in the paper, but only those general statements about how the

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war was going and what the prospects were for South Vietnam in the kind of struggle that was going on then. I quote from some of the conclusions of the draft finally approved by the USIB:

a. "We believe Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving. Strengthened South Vietnamese capabilities and effectiveness, and particularly US involvement, are causing the Viet Cong increased difficulty, although there are as yet no persuasive indications that the Communists have been grievously hurt."

b. "Assuming no great increase in external support to the Viet Cong, changes and improvements which have occurred during the past year now indicate that the Viet Cong can be contained militarily..... However, we do not believe that it is possible at this time to project the future of the war with any confidence. Decisive campaigns have yet to be fought and no quick and easy end to the war is in sight ..."

c. "Developments during the last year or two also show some promise of resolving the political weaknesses, particularly that of insecurity in the countryside, upon

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which the insurgency has fed. However, the government's capacity to translate military success into lasting political stability is questionable."

14. The estimate thus rang no tocsin. To put it in simpler language: things are not going to hell; we don't know how it will all come out, but the South Vietnamese are not doing so badly; Diem is improving, he might win the military struggle, but even if he does don't think the political troubles of South Vietnam will be over. It is not necessary to spell out for the reader how Diem was ousted a half-year later, and how the political and military situation degenerated to critical proportions by the end of 1964. Why was the estimate so wrong?

15. This was a case where the original draft prepared by the O/NE staff was essentially correct, but was fatally weakened as the process of <sup>re</sup>view and coordination proceeded. This was a long and painful <sup>^</sup><sub>affair</sub> (process) for me as chairman, since I helped the staff prepare the initial draft and myself wrote the conclusions to that draft. Let me quote some of these conclusions, c below being the final one:

a. "There is no satisfactory objective means of determining how the war is going. The increased US

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involvement has apparently enabled the South Vietnamese regime to check Communist progress and perhaps even to improve the situation in some areas; however, it is impossible to say whether the tide is running one way or the other ..."

b. "On the South Vietnamese side, new strategic concepts, such as the fortified hamlet, and shifts in military and security organization, training, and tactics have strengthened the counter-guerrilla effort. However, very great weaknesses remain and will be difficult to surmount. Among these are lack of aggressive and firm leadership at all levels of command, poor morale among the troops, lack of trust between peasant and soldier, poor tactical use of available forces, a very inadequate intelligence system, and obvious Communist penetration of the South Vietnamese military organization."

c. "The struggle in South Vietnam at best will be protracted and costly. The Communists are determined to win control, and the South Vietnamese alone lack the present capacity to prevent their own eventual destruction. Containment of the Communists and reestablishment of a

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modicum of security in the countryside might be possible with great US effort in the present political context of South Vietnam, but substantial progress toward Vietnamese self-dependence cannot occur unless there are radical changes in the methods and personnel of the South Vietnamese Government. Even should these take place without mishap, this would only be a beginning; the Communists retain capabilities and support which will require years of constructive effort to dissipate."

16. Some of the process of dilution began in the Board itself. The Board did not change the main thrust of the paper, or alter essentially the wording of the conclusions cited in a and b above. But it did eliminate some of the prescient words from both the text and the conclusions that are cited in c above. The final conclusion now read simply:

"With US help, the South Vietnamese regime stands a good chance of at least containing the Communists militarily. However, the modus operandi of the Diem government, and particularly its measures to prevent the rise of contenders for political power, have reduced the government's effectiveness, both politically and militarily. We believe that unless

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radical changes are made in these methods of government, there is little hope that the US involvement can be substantially curtailed or that there will be a material and lasting reduction in the Communist threat."

The serious weakness of this change was that it shifted the emphasis from the inherent difficulty and long-term character of the problem (to which Diem contributed) to an indictment of the Diem regime. This led us into trouble with the State Department representative at the coordination meeting.

17. The military representatives at the coordination meeting were quite satisfied with the paper. Some had served in South Vietnam and had been appalled at the South Vietnamese military performance. The emphasis in the paper on political weaknesses as a major cause of the military failures quite naturally appealed to their professional instincts as well as confirmed their own observations. The indictment of the Diem regime, however, caused the State representative considerable pain, no doubt because it called into question <sup>the</sup> existing US policy of working with the Diem regime. He thus reserved his position on this aspect of the paper. The State Department representative also thought the estimate underestimated the

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prospects for gains through an improved military effort, regarding which we had stated, "With US help, South Vietnam stands a good chance of at least containing the Communists militarily."

18. Thus, the DCI and the USIB members were presented with a paper which -- even without the gloomy long-term prospects which the Board of National Estimates had eliminated -- was a fairly dolorous document. The existence of a reservation obliged them to look at it carefully, and the DCI, who was then John McCone, was particularly uneasy, since it seemed to contradict the more optimistic judgments made by those in policy circles who had been sent to Vietnam to make on-the-spot appraisals and recommendations. He therefore decided to postpone USIB consideration and asked the Board of National Estimates to consult with some of those who had been on such missions. These were General Wheeler, who was then Chief of Staff of the Army, General Krulak, who was special assistant to the JCS for counterinsurgency affairs, Roger Hilsman, who had only recently become Assistant Secretary <sup>of State</sup> /for Far Eastern Affairs, and Mike Forrestal, who was a special assistant to the President.

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19. None of these consultations was particularly helpful. It appeared to me that these witnesses were reluctant to make a frontal assault on the judgments of the paper, but equally reluctant to endorse it. There was a general tendency to take issue with a particular sentence purporting to state a fact, rather than an estimative judgment, and to enumerate evidence to the contrary. This or that was "too pessimistic," but there was no clear line of argument which emerged. All held forth some degree of optimism, largely based upon the belief -- often supported by particular examples -- that things were better than they ~~were~~ <sup>had been a year ago.</sup> This indeed may have been true, but this did not establish how badly things were going before or how this degree of improvement stood up to the task, namely to deal with a determined and resourceful opponent who was immeasurably helped by the profound underlying political weaknesses of South Vietnam. None of them was attempting to mislead, but the simple fact was that each of them in some way and to some degree was committed to the existing US policy and was not intellectually free at that point or in those circumstances to stand back and look at the situation in its broadest aspects.

20. The drafters then returned to their desks and prepared a revised draft. The staff members, although becoming increasingly weary of the controversy, were nevertheless much inclined to stick to their guns. I had also become weary of the controversy but somewhat more inclined than they to shade the estimate in a more optimistic direction. I began to think that perhaps I had been

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too gloomy; at the same time I had to get an estimate through, and the DCI had set us a new deadline. I did not believe that I could get the DCI and other components of the agency to go along if I stuck to the original draft, that that draft might produce a military as well as a State Department dissent if I insisted upon it (since high-ranking personnel had now become engaged), and that such a situation would result in a paper more offensive to the judgment of myself and the staff than one which moved slightly toward a less pessimistic view. What we wrote were approximately the conclusions I have cited above (paragraph 13). I gaveled such a paper through over some staff objection and rode easily through the USIB with the DCI's full concurrence.

21. The final estimate was not designed to, or did it, give anyone a sense of comfort. Indeed, very recently a senior State Department official, who has had a close association with Vietnamese affairs and who had most likely seen only the finished product, remarked to me that it was "too bad" more attention had not been paid to this estimate by the policy-makers. Nevertheless, what disturbs me today is that it did not sound the alarm which it should have and which was sounded in the first draft conclusions. But I am not alone in my regrets. About six months after the estimate was completed, Diem fell. About a year after the estimate was completed, Mr. McCone took the occasion to express

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to me and to Sherman Kent that he regretted his own role in the affair and that we were "right the first time."

22. The lesson which I learned from this experience is to shun the advice of those who in one way or another are committed to or responsible for a particular line of policy. There can be no doubt that they are well-informed, but it is also their fate to be hopeful. Above all, their responsibility is to their policy-making chiefs, and they can hardly be expected to recite before an intelligence working group information or beliefs which implicitly or explicitly might suggest that existing policy is based upon unsound premises. Study of the premises of national policy is the business of intelligence officers, and it is as unfair to ask the executors of policy to testify on the soundness of those premises as it is unwise to accord uncritical acceptance to their views.

C. Likely Courses of Action when evidence is contradictory or when an effort is made to deceive.

23. I would like to discuss in this connection an estimate which was not very important in terms of its policy impact; the judgment made was so equivocal that it provided the warning needed. It was, however, wrong, and I thought it wrong at the time. It was a crash estimate, requested on the morning of December 12, 1961 and approved by the USIB on the afternoon of the following day, on

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the likelihood of an Indian attack upon Goa. During the preceding few weeks Indian troops had been concentrating in the Goa area, public opinion -- especially on the left -- was clamoring for action, and a strong momentum in favor of invasion had developed. Yet, the evidence was conflicting, and it was possible that these activities were designed purely to apply pressure and bring about the incorporation of Goa into India by peaceful means.

24. We thought that Nehru had not made up his mind and was being subjected to contradictory pressures. We concluded:

"Clearly there is strong evidence pointing to an invasion -- the military and political preparations have gone so far as to be difficult to reverse without some loss of prestige to the Indian government. Although the Indians perhaps still hope that their warlike activities will extract concessions from the Portuguese, we doubt that the Lisbon Government will move far enough -- if at all -- to meet Indian requirements. However, relying chiefly on our judgment of what Nehru conceives to be India's basic interests and our assessment of his past behavior, we believe that the chances of a direct military invasion are still about even."

Five days after this estimate was approved the Indians seized Goa by military force.

25. The formulation in the final estimate was *close to that of the original staff draft* ~~the same one~~ which the O/NE Staff ~~had formulated in its initial~~ draft. In a post-invasion memorandum to the Chairman of the Board of National Estimates, the Chief of the O/NE Near East Staff stated that initially he and his O/CI colleagues had rated the chances as less than even, "relying mainly on Nehru's restraint in previous crises over Goa and

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their estimate of his attitudes, objectives, and ability to control developments." He noted further that from informal talks with the State Department intelligence research people, he had learned that they rated the chances of invasion as "considerably less than even," a view shared by the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Policy Planning Council. The O/NE staff, impressed by the evidence of advancing preparations, departed from its Near Eastern confreres far enough to qualify the chances as "slightly less than even."

26. The Board of National Estimates agreed generally with the experts. I was in a difficult position as chairman, since I was impressed more by the evidence than by the history of Nehru's political attitudes; to me, the reports from those agency and defense personnel who had seen the preparations and talked with the Indians sounded as if the Indians meant business and intended to finish the Goa business once and for all. I did succeed in moving my colleagues a little closer to dead center; the text finally read, "the chances of a direct military invasion are still only about even." I succeeded in one other thing; by the wording we did imply that as long as preparations continued and the Portuguese failed to give, the chances of invasion might rise.

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*another of the  
service repres-  
entatives*

27. The coordination meetings did not help me very much.

*of one service*  
The ~~Army~~ representative wanted to downgrade the chances, the

*representative of an other*  
~~Air Force~~ wished to raise them, while the others wanted to

stick with the BNE "about even" formula. *the man who* While ~~the Air Force~~

*The support of the second representative*  
~~was in my corner~~, I did not find ~~this~~ especially helpful, since

*he*  
~~the Air Force~~ wanted to add another paragraph about the threat to

US-Portuguese relations and US base rights in the Azores if the

Indians went ahead with invasion. It seemed to me that ~~the Air~~ *his*

~~Force representative's~~ position was derived more from departmental

interest than objective judgment, and this I could not accept in

an intelligence estimate. We stayed with the BNE "still about even"

*^*  
formula, and this was also agreed by the USIB without dissent.

28. The day after the estimate was approved, the estimated  
odds on an invasion rose perceptibly in reports from New Delhi.

The Army Attaché said he believed invasion would "take place very  
soon."

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The only person who did not seem to think an invasion was on was  
the US Ambassador in New Delhi, who expressed the belief less than  
24 hours before it began that action was not imminent.

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29. The actual invasion provided me with a certain amount of professional satisfaction, but it also raised the question of why the others had been wrong. The only answer I can give is that the evidence, though conflicting (the Ambassador no doubt was the victim of some deceit), did include reports with a decided ring of seriousness. These reports were of course read by those who still rated the chances of invasion as even or less than even. They were relying on Nehru's high-mindedness, and since this did not jibe with the evidence, they had nowhere to go and had to sit on the fence. The lesson to be derived from this experience is not to look only at the evidence and to disregard the doctrines and attitudes of leaders; that would be folly. The lesson is to try to reconcile the two; in so doing we perhaps would find that, as in the law, there is more than one line of precedent.

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30. My colleagues could, I am sure, make an analysis of estimates in which they actively participated and which fell short, and they could draw similar lessons from them. In time we could have so many "lessons" floating around that we would become tongue-tied. We could fall into the tragic error of the young man whose aggressive and fast-moving brother killed himself by wrapping his car around a light pole; the surviving brother was so determined to plod about on foot that he was run over by a truck. Our job is to make estimates; we have to take the plunge. This does not mean reckless diving, but it does not mean standing helplessly on the end of the diving board worrying about every conceivable hazard to health and safety.

31. There is no alternative to regarding each estimative problem as a new one and applying one's accumulated knowledge and experience to it. It helps to try to determine why we were right or why we were wrong and to use these determinations as signposts along the way, but we must also remember that the specialist who misled us on one estimate corrected our misapprehensions on another, that the political philosophy which a national leader seemed to negate in one action he might never negate again. The problems we are dealing with are too complex for simple rules or simple "lessons." The magic words "estimate" or "judgment" are simply the exercise of good sense in light of everything it is possible to learn or to ponder concerning any particular matter.

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